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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000352

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: VISITING DAS DELIVERS STRONG MESSAGE TO CLOSE  
LUKASHENKO ADVISOR

REF: MINSK 306

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d)

Summary

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11. (C) Visiting EUR DAS David Kramer and Ambassador were invited to an informal meeting with Presidential Administration Deputy Head and close Lukashenko advisor Natalya Petkevich. Following a disappointing meeting with Foreign Minister Martynov and an unequivocal endorsement from the opposition coalition leadership, Kramer agreed to a brief meeting at a restaurant on April 25. Kramer stressed to Petkevich that the Lukashenko regime must immediately undertake political reform, including the release of all political prisoners, to avoid more robust sanctions. Without making any promises, Petkevich explored ways to finding a solution on the issue of political prisoners and other preconditions for deepening ties with the USG. Kramer stressed that time is running out and the USG would only reconsider implementing further sanctions when it observed concrete actions. End summary.

DAS Kramer Seek Opposition Input on Meeting Petkevich  
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12. (C) During an April 25 meeting with the leaders of the opposition coalition (septel), EUR DAS David Kramer sought the advice on whether to hold an informal meeting with Presidential Administration Deputy Head Natalia Petkevich on the margins of his April 23-25 visit to Minsk. Foreign Policy Advisor to Lukashenko Valentin Rybakov, an established contact of Ambassador, was interested in organizing the meeting for Kramer. Without revealing to the opposition leaders Rybakov's name as the go-between, Kramer noted he was considering the GOBs request to meet with Petkevich because his brief April 23 meeting with Foreign Minister Martynov was useless. FM Martynov flatly rejected the USG position that it was up to Belarus to make the necessary political reforms to jumpstart relations with the U.S. and expressed interest only in deepening cooperation in "areas of mutual concern." When Kramer made clear that Martynov's request was a non-starter, the FM abruptly ended the meeting.

13. (C) Kramer told the opposition leaders that although Petkevich is on the U.S. and EU visa bans, Petkevich is a less odious member of Lukashenko's inner circle than some others and the dictator needed to hear an unfiltered version of the firm U.S. message on the preconditions for improving bilateral ties. Kramer noted that at the top of U.S. preconditions is the immediate release of all, repeat all, political prisoners. However, Kramer stressed that he was prepared to cancel the informal meeting, which would take

place at a restaurant, if the opposition leaders did not believe the meeting would advance the interests of the democratic forces.

#### Opposition Supports Delivering Strong Message to GOB

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14. (C) Opposition leaders were unanimously in favor of Kramer meeting with Petkevich. De facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, United Civic Party (UCP) head Anatoliy Lebedko, Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) head Vintsuk Vyachorka, and Belarusian Communist Party (BPC) chairman Sergey Kalyakin stressed that the coalition's strategy for democratic change hinges on forcing the regime into a dialogue with the opposition (reftel). They stressed that in addition to the release of political prisoners, Kramer should also demand from Petkevich the government's pledge not to interfere in the opposition's April 26 Chernobyl demonstrations and permission to hold the coalition's upcoming regional conferences and democratic congress inside Belarus. The opposition leaders encouraged Kramer to inform the press of his meeting with Petkevich to preempt state media attempts to distort the U.S. message. Based on the reaction of the opposition leaders, Kramer said he would meet with Petkevich, but he reassured the coalition members that the U.S. would not change its firm position on Belarus until it observed visible and concrete reforms.

#### Message Delivered

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15. (C) Following his meeting with the opposition coalition,

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Kramer and Ambassador met with Petkevich and Rybakov at a restaurant close to the Embassy. Despite the GOB's public calls for stronger ties with the U.S., Kramer pointed to a worrisome trend of an increase in the number of politically charged arrests and imprisonments. Kramer explained to Petkevich the U.S. position that Belarus can either take steps to improve relations or the regime can allow relations to deteriorate further by doing nothing or making the situation worse.

16. (C) In order to improve relations, the regime must at a minimum: 1) release all political prisoners and drop pending charges against other activists; 2) allow the opposition to hold the Chernobyl March and future demonstrations peacefully and without GOB provocation; and, 3) allow the opposition to convene the regional conferences and democratic congress within Belarus. If the regime refused to ignore the concerns of the international community, Kramer warned that U.S. legislation known as the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act provides the USG specific tools to increase the pressure on the regime, including expanding the visa ban and targeting some state-owned industries for economic sanctions.

#### Petkevich Appears To Take Message Seriously

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17. (C) After paying close attention and taking notes on Kramer's message, Petkevich responded in a non-defensive manner to each of our initial conditions for further dialogue. On the release of political prisoners, Petkevich, who is Chairperson of the Commission on Prison Pardons, outlined the normal procedure for seeking a pardon: the prisoner must apply for pardon in writing with acknowledgement of guilt. When Kramer pointed out that imprisoned opposition activists would not likely concede guilt to bogus charges, Petkevich agreed that the Pardon Commission could consider applications without admission of guilt, although "such applications would be more difficult." Petkevich added that any applications for pardon would be considered quickly and thought that a positive decision was possible for a majority of "proper applications."

¶18. (C) On the Chernobyl demonstrations, Petkevich said that Lukashenko instructed law enforcement agencies to avoid responding to provocations against the opposition. The Deputy PA Head opined that all would be peaceful on April 26 as long as opposition activists did not resort to "dangerous" provocations, which she seemed to define as destruction of property, or the throwing of rocks. She ironically noted that the regime's use of force on April 26 would be a sign of weakness. Petkevich also did not see a major problem in allowing the opposition to hold its democratic congress, stressing that such a decision was an issue for the local authorities.

¶19. (C) Petkevich called for compromises on both sides and recognition of GOB positive moves. Petkevich highlighted her own efforts to prevent the closure of the prominent human rights NGO Belarus Helsinki Commission office after Ambassador had raised with Rybakov the USG's interest in this case. She also noted the regime's relatively mild reaction to the March 25 demonstrations. Petkevich expressed strong resentment of the EU's unwillingness to delay or cancel plans to remove GSP for Belarus following the government's recent decision to allow the European Commission to open an office in Minsk. Kramer reiterated the three conditions for improvement of relations with the USG and stressed that time is no longer on the side of the regime; Kramer would be convening an interagency meeting upon his return to Washington on possible additional sanctions against Belarus.

¶10. (C) Following the meeting with Petkevich, Kramer informed independent media that he met with Petkevich, at her initiative, to deliver a strong message on the U.S. position on Belarus to a high-level administration official. Ambassador gave a more detailed read out of the meeting to opposition leaders and requested input and feedback from them after they have had a chance to discuss how best to proceed with amnesty applications for political prisoners. (Note: After departing Minsk, Kramer also phoned EU Special Advisor Pirkka Tapiola to inform him of the meeting. Tapiola was very supportive of the message delivered to Petkevich. End note)

Comment  
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¶11. (C) While we were surprised that Petkevich showed some  
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flexibility on pardoning political prisoners, the regime has a proven track record of breaking its promises. Indeed, the motivation behind Kramer's meetings with senior GOB officials was to give Lukashenko one last opportunity to start down the road of reform before the U.S. started down the road of stronger sanctions. We were encouraged to find the opposition extremely pleased with the outcome of Kramer's meeting with Petkevich, underscoring their strong desire to muster sufficient political force to hold similar meetings with influential players in the regime.

¶12. (C) Petkevich is well-spoken, confident, and assertive, and was completely aware of her limitations and powers. Although we doubt the dictator will agree to release prominent opposition leader Aleksandr Kozulin and other political prisoners to avoid further U.S. sanctions, Petkevich seemed willing and able to at least discuss our conditions with Lukashenko.

¶13. (U) DAS Kramer cleared this message.  
Stewart